THE FAITH OF ROBERT BROWNING

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BY

EDWARD A. G. HERMANN

"So take and use Thy work:
Amend what flaws may lurk,
What strain o' the stuff, what
warpings past the aim!"
RABBI BEN EZRA

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IN
GRATITUDE AND LOVE
THIS LITTLE BOOK
IS DEDICATED
TO
MY WIFE
COMPANION AND HELPER
IN THE
LIFE OF FAITH
AND IN
THE WORK OF MY MINISTRY

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"He gathers earth's whole good into his arms;
Standing, as man now, stately, strong and wise,
Marching to fortune, not surprised by her.
One great aim, like a guiding-star, above —
Which tasks strength, wisdom, statcliness, to lift
His manhood to the height that takes the prize;
A prize not near — lest overlooking earth
He rashly spring to seize it — nor remote,
So that he rest upon his path content;
But day by day, while shimmering grows shine,
And the faint circlet prophesies the orb,
He sees so much as, just evolving these,
The stateliness, the wisdom and the strength,
To due completion, will suffice this life,
And lead him at his grandest to the grave."

— *Colombe's Birthday.*

"Just when we are safest, there's a sunset-touch,
A fancy from a flower-bell, some one's death,
A chorus-ending from Euripides,—
And that's enough for fifty hopes and fears
As old and new at once as nature's self,
To rap and knock and enter in our soul,
Take hands and dance there, a fantastic ring,
Round the ancient idol, on his base again,—
The grand Perhaps! We look on helplessly.
There the old misgivings, crooked questions are:
This good God,—what He could do, if He would,
Would, if He could — then must have done long since:
If so, when, where and how? some way must be;
Once feel about, and soon or late you hit
Some sense, in which it might be, after all.
. . . That way
Over the mountain, which who stands upon
Is apt to doubt if it be meant for a road;
While, if he views it from the waste itself,
Up goes the line there, plain from base to brow,
Not vague, mistakable! what's a break or two
Seen from the unbroken desert either side?
And then (to bring in fresh philosophy)
What if the breaks themselves should prove at last
The most consummate of contrivances
To train a man's eye, teach him what is faith?"

— Bishop Blougram's Apology.

THE FAITH OF ROBERT BROWNING

In an attempt to interpret the faith of Robert Browning it may not be necessary to go back to the source and trace the course of all those streams of thought that flowed down into the life of the last century. We must, however, take into account some of the more important intellectual tendencies of modern times, for we can hardly hope to understand Robert Browning's message, nor fully appreciate the greatness of his faith, unless we realize to some extent the power of those deep, silent under-currents and cross-currents of error which swept so many from their old moorings and carried them into an unknown sea, only to make shipwreck of their faith. Browning not only resisted these treacherous currents but made progress in spite of them. Amid the storms that raged about his intellectual life he always felt secure because Hope was his anchor, and he came into port grandly because God had been the Captain of his soul.

In many ways the century that produced Robert Browning was the greatest in the history of the world. The progress of the last

fifty years has been unprecedented. It has been a century of material, intellectual and moral achievement. Notwithstanding the presence in our civilization of a crass materialism and its progeny of evils, we may say that faith played no little part in this wonderful progress and the century ended with a shout of triumph.

But the nineteenth century *began* with a wail of despair. What was wrong with humanity? Humanity had lost its faith in God. Back in the past something had happened that had shaken the very foundations of belief and a satisfactory readjustment had not yet taken place.

Just as before and after a volcanic eruption you can feel the vibrations in the earth, indicating that something is about to happen, or has happened, in the world of nature, so, for a long time before and after the Renaissance and the Reformation, disturbing influences were at work in the intellectual and religious life of the world. The sub-normal conditions of European society in the Middle Ages made an upheaval necessary. The soul-life of humanity may be buried for centuries in a grave dug by a selfish materialism, or a false philosophy, or a tyrannical ecclesiasticism, but in some great crisis,— some joyous resurrection day, — it will arise again and assert its power. When these upheavals occur, whether we think

of them in relation to the past as a resurrection or in relation to the future as a new birth, the new knowledge acquired and the new forces set in motion impose upon future generations the task of readjusting the new knowledge to the growing life. This is what has actually happened in our modern era. We have been busy during these past few centuries trying to find our place in the new universe that has come into existence through Copernicus and others, and we are just beginning to get our bearings and to recover our sense of an immanent God.

The Renaissance was a new birth in the intellectual life and the Reformation a new birth in the religious life of the world,— upheavals, if you please, from which have come influences whose power for evil and for good has not yet been fully spent. For the time being the far-away God of the Dark Ages was rediscovered in this world. The former attitude of other-worldliness gave place to a humanistic tendency, and interest was centered not in a distant heaven but in the affairs of this life. Reason and Faith began to breathe the air of freedom. But even in this new atmosphere lurked the germs of a morbid pessimism which was destined to disease the mind of a later generation. The shifting of emphasis to this world, during the Renaissance, caused a reac-

tion afterwards into an extreme form of pantheism in which God, as a spirit pervading all things, was vaguely felt, but the sense of God as a Personality entirely lost. And pantheism inevitably leads either to atheism or to agnosticism.

On the other hand, the narrow orthodoxy of the seventeenth and the eighteenth century reacted into Deism which pushed God so far away again that it was practically a renunciation of Him. Reason was enthroned and infidelity ran rampant. Compte thought that humanity had gotten along so far that it could henceforth easily dispense with a God. He declared that "science would conduct God to the frontier of His universe and politely bow Him out, with thanks for His provisional services." That is practically what Deism did,—with the "thanks" omitted! The light by which the good God had meant to lead His children into a clearer conception of the truth was revealed so suddenly and with such intensity that many were blinded and were left to grope in the darkness of unbelief. The reaction that set in after the Reformation is well stated by Symonds. In referring to the modern age of the disintegration of old beliefs he says: "We are undergoing the greatest cataclysm of thought that the world has ever suffered, and in the midst of it all some must perish. The

cataclysm began with the Reformation. That was the first and most powerful introduction of a scepticism which since has never ceased to work, successfully undermining in the world at large . . . all creeds, from the most insignificant to the most vital. And in this destructive work science has helped." I quote this well-known passage not only to point out the perils of an intellectual democracy but also to show the tendency toward the scientific materialism which robbed so many thinkers of the nineteenth century of their faith in God.

During these few centuries the pendulum of thought swung constantly between the extremes of pantheism and transcendentalism. In discussing the religious problem and showing that the modern trend is toward immanence Eucken says that both these views,— the pantheistic and the transcendental,— result in a life devoid of religion. "At first the divine is brought near to our existence; then it is closely associated with it as an inspiring force, and finally it totally disappears, or vanishes to an unapproachable distance."

These were some of the influences that entered into the intellectual life of the nineteenth century, and they naturally helped to create an atmosphere of pessimism. It is no wonder that a wail of despair went up from the heart of humanity, for, if we may use Matthew Ar-

nold's phrase in this connection, humanity was lying helpless and hopeless between two worlds, —"one dead, the other powerless to be born." We need only to read the literature of this period to see how deeply the atmosphere was colored with gloom. Literature is like a vast mirror reflecting the life of the age which produces it. Schopenhauer, prince of pessimistic philosophers, while personally not only unattractive but even repulsive and, therefore, often friendless, had a host of unconscious followers who, like him, felt only pain and want and deemed it sheer folly to seek peace in this world or to hope for happiness in a world to come. Their creed is well expressed in Thompson's familiar lines:

"O length of the intolerable hours!
O nights that are as æons of slow pain!
O Time, too ample for our vital powers!
O Life whose woeful vanities remain
Immutable for all of all our legions
Through all the centuries and in all the regions,
Not of your speed and variance do we complain.
We do not ask a longer term of strife,
Weakness and weariness and nameless woes;
We do not claim renewed and endless life
When this which is our torment here shall close,
And everlasting conscious inanition!
We yearn for speedy death in full fruition,
Dateless oblivion and divine repose."

Can you imagine a philosophy of life more hopeless than this? Even Buddha's creed was nobler. An intellectual atmosphere in which such a poem could be produced must have been devoid of vital faith.

Into an atmosphere saturated, or at least tainted, with such pessimistic ideas three great religious poets were born. One was a representative of the classic type whose beauty of form almost makes one long for the intellectual culture of ancient Greece; another, a singer whose sweet music is often in the minor key, yet so mystic in its rhythm that somehow it has the power to subdue the heart's restlessness and sorrow; the third, a rugged, fearless prophet whose glowing idealism and moral militancy summon us to a life of heroic thought and action. I said that all three were *religious* poets, but we must yield to Robert Browning the place of pre-eminence as a poet of *faith*. For the sake of contrast I shall quote a few characteristic lines, first from Matthew Arnold and then from Alfred Tennyson.

Arnold's religious attitude is admirably set forth in his poem entitled "Dover Beach":

"The sea is calm tonight,
The tide is full, the moon lies fair
Upon the straits; — on the French coast the light
Gleams, and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.

Come to the window; sweet is the night air,
Only, from the long line of spray
Where the sea meets the moon-blanched sand,
Listen! you hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.

"Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Ægean, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery; we
Find also in the sound a thought
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

"The sea of faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating to the breath
Of the night wind, down the vast edges drear,
And naked shingles of the world.

"Ah, Love, let us be true
To one another, for the world which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help in pain;

And we are here as on a darkling plain,
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night."

These melancholy moods, so characteristic of Matthew Arnold, were born of a sense of spiritual loss. He is not a poet of faith, but of despair. His face is ever turned toward the past, and he sighs for the golden glory of a day that will never come back again.

Tennyson stands half-way between Arnold and Browning. Like the latter, he is the product of the scientific age which produced Charles Darwin, Thomas Huxley, John Stuart Mill and Herbert Spencer. He was thoroughly familiar with current scientific knowledge and in his efforts to reconcile science with religion he coined many striking phrases. But in order to prove the correctness of some pet theory, or to defend some favorite doctrine, he is quoted by sceptics as often as by believers. Professor Royce, of Harvard, in his "Studies of Good and Evil," devotes an entire chapter to a discussion of the "Pessimism of Tennyson," and shows what a great change had come over the poet's faith from the time he wrote "Locksley Hall" to the time he wrote "Locksley Hall Sixty Years After." Indeed, we know that even in his earlier years Tennyson

was so profoundly touched by the mystery of human sorrow that his faith was well nigh eclipsed. In that great religious poem, "In Memoriam," in which he faces the problem which in another form baffled the mind of Æschylus and Job, he confesses that we who love, and lose, and suffer, are like mere children "crying in the night," like children "crying for the light, and with no language but a cry." And again he cries out pathetically:

"I falter where I firmly trod,
And, falling with my weight of cares
Upon the great world's altar stairs
That slope through darkness up to God,

"I stretch lame hands of faith, and grope,
And gather dust and chaff, and call
To what I feel is Lord of all,
And faintly trust the larger hope."

In the vast world of life "so various, so beautiful, so new," Arnold could see "neither joy, nor light, nor certitude, nor peace, nor help in pain." Browning, too, had heard the "melancholy roar" of the "sea of faith," but its sadness did not depress him. For mingled with what seemed to Arnold the "eternal note of sadness" Browning heard an "eternal note" of *joy*. Browning, too, heard all around him the shrieks of human despair, but

he could sing hymns of hope through stormy, starless nights, because his spiritual instincts always foretold the dawning of the new day.

"Love, hope, fear, faith — these make humanity,"

he said.

And in the indistinct twilight which comes between the darkness and the day, where Tennyson only "groped," and "faltered," and "faintly trusted" the "larger hope," Browning was confident and courageous. As he said of Sordello, we may say of him:

"He at least believed in soul, was very sure of God,"—

a line which Miss Ethel Naish says represents the "irreducible minimum" of his optimistic creed. And he could reach no sublimer mood than when he cried out with the joy which is the fruit of assurance:

"God! Thou art Love! I build my faith on that!"

At a time when men's minds were most befogged there was need for such a man of vision who could read the spiritual meaning back of the conflicts of the new age, give a fresh interpretation of the eternal verities, and start

humanity again on its upward march toward God.

One of the foremost literary critics of our day has pronounced Browning as "the most profoundly subtle mind that has exercised itself in poetry since Shakespeare." A man of intense personal sympathy, his imagination penetrated into every phase of human experience, and his lofty idealism enabled him to win

> "God out of knowledge and good out of infinite pain,
> And sight out of blindness and purity out of a stain."

His exuberant spirit sometimes took a playful mood, but he was never a mere sentimentalist. With warmth of feeling there was always depth of thought. Indeed, so deeply did he delve into the most intricate problems of existence and so earnestly did he search for an intellectual solution that he is regarded by some as a philosopher no less than as a poet. It is often difficult to draw a sharp line between Browning the poet and Browning the philosopher. It would not be improper to say, as Professor Jones suggests, that he was a philosopher in the sense in which Plato was a poet. His genius was consecrated to the noble task of revealing both beauty and truth. It was, no doubt, the consciousness of great intellectual

strength that led him, after the death of Mrs. Browning, to wander into the dangerous field of metaphysics, but this latter part of his literary career has been considered as the period of decadence. Much of his last work lacks the daring intellectual force and the moral vigor of his earlier years, and there are weak places where the speculations of the would-be philosopher break down. The cause of this decline has been attributed to failing health and the grief which the poet felt over the loss of his devoted wife, who during her life-time had been the inspiration of his best work.

But Browning never ceased to be stimulating and helpful. If his faith is occasionally overshadowed with a cloud of doubt we somehow feel that behind the cloud the sun is still shining and in a moment or two will burst out again in all its glory. His intellectual courage often fills us with the love of adventure, and we begin our quest of truth in some untried and unknown land. We are lured across green, sunlit meadows where song-birds flood the air with melody, and where we may pluck the rarest flowers of the imagination. Then comes the climb over the steep hills, and we get a vision of the mystic heights beyond. The road winds, and is often rough and stony, but though the feet bleed and the heart grow weary, we go on in our quest until — we real-

ize that we have wandered into a vast wilderness of thought and are "lost," and can hardly find our way out! We fain would travel back again over the old beaten road, and stifle forever the questionings of the mind and the unsatisfied hunger of the heart. But it is in such moments of mental darkness that the spirit of the adventurer comes to our aid, and quickens our faltering faith, and guides us out of darkness into the light of truth.

"If I stoop
Into a dark, tremendous sea of cloud,
It is but for a time; I press God's lamp
Close to my breast; its splendor, soon or late,
Will pierce the gloom; I shall emerge some day."

But it is Browning the poet, not the philosopher, who inspires us with his gospel of courage and hope. His greatness is not due to the artistic form in which he clothed his thoughts. It is the religious element that runs through all his work that sets him apart as a man of faith. His art is merely the channel through which he ministers to the needs of the higher life. He was one of the greatest exponents of the art of optimism that the world has ever seen. One of his best interpreters puts him in that class of poets who are also prophets, and says: "He was never the 'idle singer of an empty day,' but one for whom poetic enthusi-

asm was intimately bound up with religious faith, and who 'spoke in numbers' not merely because 'the numbers came,' but because they were for him the necessary vehicle of an inspiring thought."

Because of the strong dramatic element in Browning's writings it has seemed difficult for some to determine just what is the poet's own faith, for as a literary artist he could easily hide his own feelings behind the many characters created by his vivid and versatile imagination. But as we move among Browning's men and women we cannot escape the influence of his wonderful personality. The great soul of the man cannot be hid. His faith is like a vein of gold running through the cumbersome mass of science, philosophy and art, sometimes shining clearly on the surface, at other times imbedded in the crude rock. But if we have the eye for spiritual beauty and the instinct of the lover of the truth we can readily distinguish what is pure gold from what is worthless or inferior foreign matter. The vein here and there runs deep, and he who would possess the gold must dig. We have picked up from this mine of intellectual and spiritual treasure only a few nuggets which may serve as specimens of the rich quality of his faith.

Ernest Haeckel has declared that "God, freedom and immortality are the three great

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buttresses of superstition which it is the business of science to destroy." I shall not try to prove that he was wrong. But I should like to contrast with his rank materialism Browning's fine spiritual idealism, and stress the practical value of his faith. These three "buttresses of superstition" at which Haeckel would point the destructive guns of science are the very foundation-stones that support Browning's massive temple. He could see no such fatal antagonism between science and religion. It was precisely along these lines that he built up his sublime faith, notwithstanding the fact that he accepted the best conclusions of contemporary science as the most satisfactory explanations of natural phenomena. He believed in God and man and immortality, and he was no worse off than Haeckel. On the other hand, the application of his faith to the experiences and problems of life proved him to be a man of good, practical common-sense. His virile manhood was the direct outgrowth of his vital faith. Superstition cannot produce a type of noble character, nor can science rob us of that which is best in life and religion. Perhaps Browning was not always orthodox in the strictly evangelical sense, but who can deny that with open mind he ever sought for truth, and having found it, followed it with an intellectual honesty and a moral courage that mark

him as a true man and a prophet of God?

Instead of destroying his faith in a God of whom he thought as Wisdom, Goodness, Power, Love, science only strengthened and deepened it. When God seemed lost in all the intricate and complex machinery of natural law, this brave man took the telescope from the hands of the sceptical scientist and, looking up, cried out: "Behold! I see an angel standing in the sun!" Likewise he took the microscope and read the mystic secret of life that slumbered in the heart of a rose,—"I saw God everywhere." Science gave him the idea of God as a First Great Cause, eternally creating, faithfully sustaining, lovingly permeating the life of Nature and the life of man. He conceived of God as the source, the substance and the sum of all things, animate and inanimate; mysteriously transcending His creation and yet unceasingly working in it; carrying out His purposes of holy love in accordance with an orderly method. And the see-er becomes the say-er; the poet turns prophet and acts as mediator between science and religion. If he saw God everywhere it was his joyous privilege to interpret God to those who were in doubt.

"I spoke as I saw;
I report as a man may of God's work,— all's love,
yet all's law.

Now I lay down the judgeship He lent me. Each faculty tasked
To perceive Him, has gained an abyss where a dew-drop was asked."

But it was not through a purely rational process that Browning found God. It is true that as a great religious philosopher he delighted to test his strength, and piled up argument upon argument until the apex of his intellectual pyramid touched the very heavens wherein the Divine being sat enthroned. But personally he did not need the proof of logic to convince him of the existence of God. It was rather through a process of spiritual intuition that he made this greatest of all discoveries,— God! The scientist may sweep the starry heavens with his telescope in his search for God and still cry out with Job in the bitter agony of disappointment: "O that I knew where I might find Him!" But this was to him the grandest, most self-evident fact in the universe. His faith here has all the assurance of certain knowledge. It is sheer folly to attempt to prove mathematically what authenticates itself as the truth to the receptive mind and believing heart.

"I *know* that He is there, as I am here,
By the same proof which seems no proof at all,
It so exceeds familiar forms of proof."

He knows God through spiritual fellowship,—feels Him as a sublime Reality throbbing at the very centre of life and things.

In "Pauline," his first published poem, we already see that lofty idealism which is characteristic of all his finest work. In these years of early manhood,—he was then only twenty,—there struggled in his soul mysterious forces which drew him irresistibly toward God. His spiritual attitude determined his moral growth:

"I have always had one lode-star; now
As I look back I see that I have halted
Or hastened as I looked toward that star,—
A need, a trust, a yearning after God."

. . . . . .

"My soul must still advance.
I cannot chain my soul; it will not rest
In its clay prison, this narrow sphere;
It has strange impulse, tendency, desire
Which no wise I account for, nor explain,
But cannot stifle, being bound to trust
All feelings equally."

In this divine restlessness of youth he bursts out passionately:

"O God! where do they tend,—these struggling aims?
What would I have? What is this sleep which seems

To bound all? Can there be a waking point of
crowning life?
And what is that I hunger for but God?"

. . . . . .

"My God! My God! Let me for once look on
Thee
As though naught else existed, we alone!
And as creation crumbles, my soul's spark
Expand till I can say,— even from my self,—
'I need Thee and I feel Thee and I love Thee.'"

And "Pauline" concludes with this comprehensive statement which may be taken as the poet's own confession of faith:

"I believe in God and truth and love."

To Browning God was not only an abstract principle, nor even a divine spirit diffused through the universe. He was a personality, — a God of power, righteousness and love, manifesting Himself in nature, in man and in Christ.

Browning is not usually regarded as a poet of nature, and yet he has much in common with Shelley and Wordsworth, who were considered the representative nature poets of the early part of the nineteenth century. In "Pauline," "Paracelsus" and "Sordello" we discover traces of Shelley's influence. Shelley's music

struck a responsive chord in Browning's heart, and the grace and beauty of his descriptions stirred his imagination. But the soul that thirsts for the water of life can never be satisfied merely with the delicate tracery on the outside of the silver cup which has been emptied of its life-giving contents. Shelley's beauty of form appealed to Browning, but Browning hungered and thirsted for God! Poor Shelley did not so much as mention the name of God. While he was at Oxford he wrote an essay "On the Necessity of Atheism," and in accordance with his wish the simple epitaph on his tombstone in Italy describes him as an "atheist." Although he tried to abolish God from His universe, yet he did recognize a sort of spiritual presence pervading the world:

"One remains, the many change and pass;
Heaven's light forever shines; earth's shadows flee.
Life, like a dome of many-colored glass,
Stains the white radiance of eternity
Until Death tramples it to fragments."

The "One" to whom Shelley so beautifully yet so vaguely refers is to Browning the unchanging God of love and power.

Wordsworth goes a step farther than Shelley and sees through nature's loveliness the spirit of nature's God:

"The clouds were touched
And in their silent faces did he read
Unutterable love!"

It is the mature man who is speaking in "Tintern Abbey":

"I have learned to look
On nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing ofttimes the
still, sad music of humanity;
Not harsh, nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue."

But Wordsworth was not a poet of humanity in the sense in which Browning was. A friend once said to Browning, "You have not a great love for nature, have you?" to which the poet replied, "Yes, I have, but I love men and women better." Browning went beyond Shelley in that he thought of nature, with Wordsworth, as simply the garment of God. As a man of faith Browning was superior to Wordsworth in that he was not merely a poet of nature but also a poet of the human soul.

And yet in his best religious passages Wordsworth seems to fall into a vague, pantheistic mood as, for example, he continues in "Tintern Abbey":

"I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy

Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean, and the living air,
And the blue sky, and the mind of man;
A motion and a spirit that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things."

But Browning's God is not only a "presence" or an indefinable "something" or a "motion and a spirit" that pervades nature like ether. He is a creative Cause and a controlling Will. Browning was a pronounced evolutionist before Alfred Russel Wallace and Charles Darwin had given the world the result of their investigations, but he was a *Christian* evolutionist. He thought of evolution as a principle of life, a method of development, God's way of working. In describing the evolutionary process Huxley somewhere says, in his characteristic, agnostic style, "The human species, like others, plashed and floundered amid the general stream of evolution, keeping its head above the water as best it might, and *thinking neither of whence nor whither.*" Browning's spiritual instincts enabled him to look at the evolutionary process from a higher plane. He thought of it not as a blind upward struggle, but as an orderly movement that had its beginning and its end in God. He believed

in a God who works according to law upward physically through nature to man, and intellectually, morally and spiritually through man to the Christ ideal. While scientific materialism left the question of agency unsolved and presented the doctrine of evolution as atheistic, it is evident that Browning regards God as being back of and in the process, directing it toward a divine goal. There is a remarkable passage in "Paracelsus" which expresses his faith in an immanent, eternally creative God. It is all the more remarkable because it was written in 1835, while Darwin's "Origin of Species," which, in a certain sense, it anticipates, was first published in 1859. In a letter to Dr. Furnivall, written in 1881, touching this point, Browning said: "All that seemed proved in Darwin's scheme was a conception familiar to me from the beginning."

"The centre-fire heaves underneath the earth,
And the earth changes like a human face;
The molten ore bursts up among the rocks,
Winds into the stone's heart, out-branches bright
In hidden mines, spots barren river-beds,
Crumbles into fine sand where sunbeams bask,—
God joys therein. The wroth sea's waves are edged
With foam, white as the bitten lip of hate;
When in the solitary wastes strange groups
Of young volcanoes come up, cyclops-like,

Staring together with their eyes on flame,—
God tastes a pleasure in their uncouth pride.
Then all is still; earth is a wintry clod;
But spring-wind, like a dancing psaltress, passes
Over its breast to waken it; rare verdure
Buds tenderly upon rough banks, between
The withered tree-roots and the cracks of frost,
Like a smile striving with a wrinkled face;
The grass grows bright, the boughs are swollen
with blooms
Like chrysalids impatient for the air,
The shining dorrs are busy, beetles run
Along the furrows, ants make their ado;
Above, birds fly in merry flocks; the lark
Soars up and up, shivering for very joy;
Afar the ocean sleeps; white fishing gulls
Flit where the strand is purple with its tribe
Of nested limpets; savage creatures seek
Their loves in wood and plain,— and God renews
His ancient rapture. *Thus He dwells in all,*
From life's minute beginnings, up at last
To man,— the consummation of this scheme
Of being, the completion of this sphere of life.
And man produced, all has its end thus far.
But in completed man begins anew
A tendency toward God."

Thus in his scheme it is seen that man is related physically to nature below him, and spiritually to the God above. If with the perfection of man's body natural evolution has reached a state of arrested development, with

man also begins a process of spiritual evolution which has its goal in the moral ideal.

"Progress is man's distinctive mark alone;
Not God's, and not the beast's. God is; they are;
Man partly is, but wholly hopes to be."

In "Prince Hoenstiel-Schwangau" this lower side of man's relationship is emphasized:

"For many a thrill of kinship I confess to
With the powers called nature, animate and inanimate;
In parts or in the whole there's something there
Manlike that somehow meets the man in me."

But in "Rabbi Ben Ezra" there is the consciousness of a nobler origin and a diviner destiny:

"Rejoice we are allied
To that which doth provide,
And not partake, effect and not receive.
A spark disturbs our clod,
Nearer we hold of God
Who gives than of His tribes that take."

And again in "Ferishtah's Fancies":

"I needs must blend the quality of man
With quality of God."

But this spiritual kinship with God does not

mean absolute identity. In "A Death in a Desert" he makes it very clear that while man partakes of the nature of God, he has a distinct individuality:

"Man is not God, but hath God's end to serve;
A master to obey, a Cause to take,
Somewhat to cast off, somewhat to become."

A few lines from "Christmas Eve" will show the spiritual kinship that exists between the creature and Creator:

"Take all in a word: the truth in God's breast
Lies trace for trace upon ours impressed;
Though He is so bright and we so dim,
We are made in His image to witness Him."

In Rabbi Ben Ezra's fine interpretation of life as struggle, growth, attainment there is often the sense of failure. But that is all right! The motive, the intention, the dominating purpose of life is there!

"All I could never be,
All men ignored in me,
This I was worth to God.

. . . . . .

"What I aspired to be
And was not, comforts me;
A brute I might have been, but would not
sink in the scale."

The old Rabbi looks forward to the time when the body shall have served its purpose in projecting the soul on its lone, upward way, and he summons age

> "To grant youth's heritage,
> Life's struggle having so far reached its term.
> Thence shall I pass approved
> A man for aye removed
> From the developed brute,
> A God, though in the germ."

In thinking of this slow upward movement of life one cannot help recalling that profound utterance of St. Paul in Romans where with a grand sweep of the imagination he sees nature in the agony of birth-throes producing the spiritual man, and with his great mind grasps the spiritual meaning of it all. "The whole creation travaileth together in pain until now. . . . For the earnest expectation of the creation waiteth for the revealing of the sons of God." And this point having been reached, the words of the Apostle John take on a new meaning: "Beloved, now *are we* the children of God and it doth not yet appear what we *shall be*, but we know that when it shall appear we shall be like *Him*, for we shall see Him as He is." All the way through man's moral progress is nothing more than the spiritual incarnation of God.

But in those lonely hours of the soul when we are baffled by life's mysteries and dissatisfied with Browning's faith in a God manifested in nature and in the life of man, and we feel the need of some deeper truth to hearten us, and we go to him with Philip's old desire burning in our hearts and trembling on our lips,— "Show us the Father and it sufficeth us,"— this great interpreter of life and religion reverently unveils for us the face of Jesus Christ. "In Him dwelt the fullness of the God-head bodily." Jesus was God manifested in the flesh. It is remarkable that as a youth he was deeply impressed with the Gospel story and entered into spiritual fellowship with the human God in Jesus:

"Can I forego the trust that He loves me?
. . . . Do I not
Pant when I read of Thy consummate power,
And burn to see Thy calm, pure truths outflash
The brightest gleams of earth's philosophy?
. . . . . Oft have I stood by Thee,
Have I been keeping lonely watch with Thee
In the damp night by weeping Olivet,
Or leaning on Thy bosom, proudly less,
Or dying with Thee on the lonely Cross,
Or witnessing thine outburst from the tomb."

He thoroughly believed in the Incarnation, in the infinite sacrifice and suffering of God, in

the power of the Resurrection Life. Love is the theme that runs through all the music of God's life. In the following quotations we get glimpses of the height and depth and breadth of his faith in God.

> "I never realized God's birth before,
> How He grew likest God in being born.
> Such ever was love's way,— to rise, it stoops."

> "Would I suffer for him that I love? So wouldst thou,— so wilt thou!
> So shall crown Thee the topmost, ineffablest, uttermost crown,
> And Thy love fill infinitude wholly, nor leave up nor down
> One spot for the creature to stand in! It is by no breath,
> Turn of eye, wave of hand, that salvation joins issue with death!
> As Thy love is discovered almighty, almighty be proved
> Thy power, that exists with it and for it, of being beloved!
> He who did most shall bear most; the strongest shall stand the most weak.
> 'Tis the weakness in strength that I cry for; my flesh that I seek
> In the Godhead! I seek and I find it. O Saul, it shall be
> A Face like my face that receives thee,— a Man like to me

Thou shalt love and be loved by, forever! A
Hand like this hand
Shall throw open the gates of new life to thee!
See the Christ stand!"

"This man so cured regards the curer then
As,— God forgive me,— who but God Himself,
Creator and sustainer of the world,
That came and dwelt in flesh on it a while.
The very God! — think, Abid; dost thou think?
So the All-great were the All-loving too!
So through the thunder comes a human voice
Saying, 'O heart I made, a heart beats here!
Face my hands fashioned, see it in myself!
Thou hast no power, nor mayst conceive of mine,
But love I gave thee, with myself to love
And thou must love me who have died for thee.'"

Browning was once discussing his own faith with Mrs. Orr, his friend and biographer, and he closed the conversation by reading to her the "Epilogue from Dramatis Personæ," in which his own Christian faith is contrasted with the ancient faith of Judaism as set forth by David, and with modern scepticism of which Renan was the chief exponent. "It will be remembered," says Mrs. Orr, "that the beautiful and pathetic second part of the poem is a cry of spiritual bereavement, the cry of those victims of nineteenth century scepticism for whom incarnate Love had disappeared from the universe, carrying with it the belief in God.

The third part attests the continued existence of God in Christ, as mystically present to the individual soul:

> 'That Face, far from vanish, rather grows,
> Or decomposes but to recompose,
> Becomes my universe that feels and knows.'

'That face,' said Mr. Browning, as he closed the book, 'that face is the face of Christ: that is how I feel about Him.'"

Dr. Augustus Strong, in his "Great Poets and their Theology," from whose chapter on Browning the above incident is quoted, says: "It will not be doubted that the secret of Browning's persistent optimism lay in his recognition of Christ as God and Saviour. If the life that pulsates through all nature is the life of Christ and if the hand that conducts the march of history is the hand that was nailed to the Cross, then we may dismiss our fears and advance to the study of life's problems with cheerful heart, believing with Pippa that, however great the intellectual difficulties may be

> 'God's in His heaven,
> All's right with the world.'

Or if any one still questions whether this is the real source of the poet's quietude as he faces the mysteries and seeming contradictions

of existence," Dr. Strong would quote for him those well known lines from "A Death in the Desert":

"I say the acknowledgment of God in Christ,
Accepted by thy reason, solves for thee
All questions in the world and out of it,
And has so far advanced thee to be wise."

Browning's unfaltering faith in God carried with it a mighty faith in man's inherent goodness and immortality. He interpreted man's nature and destiny in the light of what he believed God to be. If it be true, as Helen Keller claims, that "we cannot be optimists until we have an ideal," and we "cannot seek intelligently for good until we have known evil," then Browning was well qualified to be a teacher of life. If with DeWitt Hyde we define pessimism as "the art of emphasizing the evil" and optimism as "the art of emphasizing the good and throwing the evil in the background," then Browning was the most consummate optimist of the nineteenth century. He did not close his eyes to unpleasant facts when he made Abt Vogler say, "Evil is naught, is null, is silence implying sound," nor with eyes wide open did he condescend to be a mere "painter of dirt." He always found "good in evil and a hope in ill success" because his faith was adequate to meet any fact or experience in the moral uni-

verse. There were undoubtedly many flaws in his system of ethics, but his optimism was by no means an easy-going kind. Emerson was always serene, but he dwelt in the placid upper air of philosophy, "far from the madding crowd." Browning was "the prophet of struggling manhood,"—"a man in a world of men." "He weaved his song of hope right amidst the wail and woe of man's sin and wretchedness." He could go with Carlyle to the slums of London at midnight and see the devil in a thousand human forms and still believe, with Emerson, in the goodness and greatness of men. Dr. Wescott said, "He dared to look on the darkest and meanest forms of action and passion, from which we commonly and rightly turn our eyes, and he has brought back for us from this universal survey a conviction of hope."

"Is not His love at issue still with sin?"

Browning's power to depict evil in its worst forms is seen to no better advantage than in "The Ring and the Book." "He creates Guido, the subtlest and most powerful compound of vice in our literature,— except Iago, perhaps,— merely in order that we may see evil at its worst; and places him in an environment suited to his nature."

"Midmost blotch of black
Discernible in the group of clustered crimes
Huddling together in the cave they call
Their palace."

He describes the mother of Guido and his brothers as

"The gaunt grey nightmare in the furthest smoke,
The hag that gave these three abortions birth,
Unmotherly mother and unwomanly
Woman, that near turns motherhood to shame,
Womanliness to loathing."

Against this dark background of human life the beauty, peace and strength of a pure soul like Pompilia's shine out all the more clearly. She

"Sent prayer like incense up
To God the strong, God the beneficent,
God ever mindful in all strife and strait,
Who, for our own good, makes the need extreme,
Till at the last He puts forth might and saves."

In commenting on these lines Professor Jones says: "We feel the poet's purpose, constant throughout the whole poem. We know all the while that with him at our side we can travel safely through the depths of the Inferno, for the flames bend back for him; and it is only what we expect as the result of it all, that there should come

'A bolt from heaven to cleave roof and clear
place,
. . . then flood
And purify the scene with outside day —
Which yet, in the absolute drench of dark,
Ne'er wants its witness, some stray beauty-
beam
To the despair of hell.'"

While Browning teaches the oneness of man's nature with the nature of God, he emphasizes man's individuality, and makes each character work out his own salvation. He leaves room for man's freedom,—

"Life's business being just the terrible choice."

"God's all; man's nought;
But also, God, whose pleasure brought
Man into being, stands away
As it were a hand-breadth off, to give
Room for the newly-made to live,
And look at Him from a place apart,
And use his gifts of brain and heart."

God's purpose was

"To create man and then leave him
Able, His own word saith, to grieve Him,
But able to glorify Him too,
As a mere machine could never do,
That prayed or praised, all unaware
Of its fitness for aught but praise or prayer,
Made perfect as a thing of course."

Browning was willing to trust man to the utmost in realizing the purpose of his being. Through sin, sorrow, sickness, mistake, failure, the soul must ever travel on until it finds itself in God. This faith in the ultimate triumph of good over evil is summed up in "Apparent Failure":

"It's wiser being good than bad;
It's safer being meek than fierce;
It's fitter being sane than mad.
My own hope is, a sun will pierce
The thickest cloud earth ever stretched;
That after Last returns the First,
Though a wide compass round be fetched;
That what began best can't end worst,
And what God blessed once prove accursed."

Browning's faith in the immortality of the soul may rest partly on the scientific fact of the indestructibility of life as a whole, but his grand hope also grows out of his conception of the nature of God, out of his own spiritual instincts and his sense of the incompleteness of life here.

"There shall never be one lost good! What was shall live as before."

. . . . . .

"What was good shall be good."

. . . . . .

"On the earth the broken arcs; in the heaven a perfect round."

. . . . . .

"All we have willed or hoped or dreamed of good shall exist;
Not its semblance, but itself; no beauty, nor good, nor power
Whose voice has gone forth, but each survives for the melodist
When eternity affirms the conception of an hour.
The high that proved too high, the heroic for earth too hard,
The passion that left the ground to lose itself in the sky,
Are music sent up to God by the lover and the bard;
Enough that he heard it once; we shall hear it by and by."

. . . . . .

"And what is our failure here but a triumph's evidence
For the fullness of the days?"

In a sublime passage in "Saul," after David has comforted the low-spirited king, he feels that he has come upon the truth at last, and argues the reasonableness of immortality on the basis of love:

"Do I find love so full in my nature, God's ultimate gift,
That I doubt His own love can compete with it? Here, the parts shift?

Here, the creature surpass the Creator,— the end, what began?
Would I fain in my impotent yearning do all for this man,
And dare doubt He alone shall not help him, who yet alone can? "

He thinks it strange that we should

" In the least things have faith, yet distrust in the greatest of all."

Again he recalls the wonderful life with which Saul was gifted and of the love that had enriched it. Such a life cannot fail utterly. The work of redemption may not be completed here. The soul needs an eternity to develop its latent possibilities.

" To make such a soul,
Such a body, and then such an earth for insphering the whole?
And doth it not enter my mind (as my warm tears attest)
These good things being given, to go on, and give one more, the best?
Ay, to save and redeem and restore him, maintain at the height
This perfection,— succeed with life's dayspring, death's minute of night?
Interpose at the difficult minute, snatch Saul the mistake,
Saul the failure, the ruin he seems now,— and bid him awake

From the dream, the probation, the prelude, to find himself set
Clear and safe in new light and new life,— a new harmony yet
To be run, and continued, and ended — who knows? — or endure!
The man taught enough by life's dream, of the rest to make sure;
By the pain-throb, triumphantly winning intensified bliss,
And the next world's reward and repose, by the struggles in this."

But what if the soul's finest spiritual instincts have been perverted and as a result the moral character has been twisted into some fiendish shape that belies the dignity of divine sonship? Every spark of goodness seems to have gone out of the life of Guido. If there is another chance for Saul, can there be another chance for Guido? We shall not go into the metaphysical difficulty involved here. Suffice it to say that according to the mind of Browning, God never made a soul in vain. If that were true, then he would still hope that somewhere, here or beyond, a point would be reached where "God unmakes but to remake the soul." There is not a spot in all the great universe where God's love is not present and "beyond the dim unknown" He is "standing in the shadow keeping watch above His own." There is a vast

difference between Browning's idea of life and the mere fact of existence. Eternal life is primarily not a life of quantity but one of *quality*. The moral degenerate has not entered into the fullness of life.

There stands Guido at "creation's verge," a lonely and loveless figure, indeed. He seems to have been cast out into "outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth." His soul is shrivelling into nothingness. The real life is at a very low ebb. We see him

> "Not to die so much as slide out of life,
> Pushed by the general horror and common hate
> Low, lower,— left on the very edge of things,
> I seem to see him catch convulsively,
> One by one at all honest forms of life,
> At reason, order, decency and use,
> To cramp him and get foothold by at least;
> And still they disengage them from his clutch.
> . . . . . .
> And thus I see him slowly and surely edged
> Off all the table-land whence life upsprings
> Aspiring to be immortality."

This is existence, not life. But Guido is not lost forever. Browning believes in a hell but it is a *spiritual experience*,— the slow or sudden awakening of the sinful soul to a realizing sense of the sinfulness of its sin. Punishment is remedial, not retributive, and it must fulfil its divine purpose here or hereafter. While God

is Love, He is also Righteousness, and He often seems severe in the execution of His laws. But His justice may be only mercy in disguise. The poor restless soul, ever dissatisfied with its lower choices, is driven on relentlessly through the fires of pain that it may be purified and at last find its refuge and its rest in God.

But the good man rejoices in the consciousness of his origin and destiny. In "A Death in the Desert," the atmosphere is charged with the power and the presence of the living, eternal Christ. In His companionship there is no doubt about the reality of the soul's resurrection. The aged John hears of rumors that have spread through the world that would discredit the life and teachings of his Master. But he can testify out of personal experience that those rumors are false. In the quiet of his soul he still hears those reassuring words that had brought so much hope and comfort to the heartbroken in days gone by,—"I am the Resurrection and the Life." He can bravely face the last sunset and in its golden glow enter the gates of the "city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God."

The changes of this life are the stepping-stones to something higher:

> "Man is hurled
> From change to change unceasingly,
> His soul's wings never furled."

"The Future I may face now I have proved the Past."

Neither the changes of this life, nor the last great change, death, can separate us from the love of God, nor prevent the ongoing of the soul:

"Earth changes, but thy soul and God stand sure;
What entered into thee,
That was, is, and shall be: Potter and clay endure."

Physical death is only an incident in the continuity of the spirit,— a shadow that has temporarily fallen across the river that forever flows toward the ocean of eternity.

"O lover of my life, O soldier-saint!
No work begun shall ever pause for death!
Love will be helpful to me more and more
In the coming course, the new path I must tread."

In "A Grammarian's Funeral" the old scholar is buried on the mountain-top

"Where meteors shoot, clouds form,
Lightnings are loosened,
Stars come and go!"

He had spent a long life-time in the quest of

truth and at the close of day laid down his tools with his work all around him, undone. But he had thrown himself on God and he knew that in another room of the universe he would keep on with his tasks. He said:

"What's time? Leave Now for dogs and apes.
Man has forever."

Death is the great Emancipator. There will come a time when we shall need the body no longer, having served the purpose of its creation in projecting the soul on its way. We shall be glad some day to throw away the physical body as something outworn and useless and thus be able to rise into the consciousness of a higher freedom, just as the bird breaks away from the shell, and soars upward, and fills the air with sweet music.

Death seems like an everlasting sleep. But that is only apparent. The figure implies a renewal and an awakening. After the black night of sorrow comes the bright dawn of eternal day.

"Death with the might of his sunbeam
Touches the flesh and the soul awakes."

Browning had within him the witness of immortality:

"Have you found your life distasteful?
My life did and does smack sweet.
Was your youth of pleasure wasteful?
Mine I saved and hold complete.
Do your joys with age diminish?
When mine fail me I'll complain.
Must in death your daylight vanish?
My sun sets to rise again."

There are two short poems which the reader will forgive me for quoting in concluding this interpretation of Browning's faith, for they seem to me to express more clearly than anything that he ever wrote his own personal hope. "Prospice" was written a short time after the death of Mrs. Browning. The closing lines, which undoubtedly refer to her, express his conviction that he will meet her again in the life beyond and find love still unbroken:

"Fear death? — to feel the fog in my throat,
The mist in my face,
When the snows begin and the blasts denote
I am nearing the place,
The power of the night, the press of the storm,
The post of the foe;
Where he stands, the Arch Fear in a visible form?
Yet the strong man must go:
For the journey is done and the summit attained,
And the barriers fall,
Though a battle's to fight ere the guerdon be
gained,

The reward of it all.
I was ever a fighter, so,—one fight more,
The best and the last!
I would hate that death bandaged my eyes, and forebore,
And bade me creep past.
No! let me taste the whole of it, fare like my peers,
The heroes of old,
Bear the brunt, in a minute pay glad life's arrears
Of pain, darkness and cold.
For sudden the worst turns the best to the brave,
The black minute's at end,
And the elements' rage, the fiend-voices that rave,
Shall dwindle, shall blend,
Shall change, shall become first a peace out of pain,
Then a light, then thy breast,
O thou soul of my soul! I shall clasp thee again,
And with God be the rest!"

The "Epilogue to Asolando" was the last poem that Browning wrote. It has all of the characteristics of his virile faith. It is not a sad dirge to whose mournful strains the brave soldier must finally march to his doom. It is "a kind of re-enlistment in the service of the good; the joyous venturing forth on a new war under new conditions and in lands unknown, by a heroic man who is sure of himself and sure of his cause."

"At the midnight in the silence of the sleep-time,
When you set your fancies free,
Will they pass to where,— by death, fools think, imprisoned,—
Low he lies who once so loved you, whom you loved so,
— Pity me?

"Oh, to love so, be so loved, yet so mistaken!
What had I on earth to do
With the slothful, with the mawkish, the unmanly?
Like the aimless, helpless, hopeless, did I drivel
— Being — who?

"One who never turned his back but marched breast forward,
Never doubted clouds would break,
Never dreamed, though right were worsted, wrong would triumph,
Held we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better,
Sleep to wake.

"No, at noonday in the bustle of man's work-time
Greet the unseen with a cheer!
Bid him forward, breast and back as either should be,
'Strive and thrive!' cry 'speed, fight on; fare ever,
There as here!'"

In its ministry to the manifold needs of the higher life the strong, robust faith of Robert Browning has been justified as over against the

deadening influence of the scientific materialism of the nineteenth century, and as knowledge of the truth has increased, the insolent dictum of Haeckel, with its implied prophecy of the gradual and ultimate destruction of the Christian faith by science, has been proven false. With all the acknowledged defects in some of his last metaphysical experiments he has shown, in his work as a whole, the sweet reasonableness, the absolute necessity and the deep joy of religion, and he has with him today, in the spirit of his teachings, such representative thinkers as Sir Oliver Lodge, the eminent English scientist, who insists upon a belief in a personal God who reigns at the center of things; Henri Bergson, of France, with his "Creative Evolution"; and Rudolf Eucken, of Germany, with his spiritual philosophy. If a generation ago unappreciative critics scoffed at the sound of this new voice that was making itself heard in literature, today they place upon the brow of this poet a crown of love. Prominent theologians from the ranks of orthodoxy now find beneath the uneven and unconventional forms of his verse a faith throbbing with the life of God. His teaching as a working force in human life is recognized by no less a practical idealist and statesman than Mr. Roosevelt, who in a recent review of a book on Browning's work said: "There are

poets whom we habitually read far more often than Browning, and who minister better to our more primitive needs and emotions. There are few whose lines come to us so naturally in certain crises of the soul, which are also crises of the intellect."

"I go to prove my soul!
I see my way as birds their trackless way.
I shall arrive! what time, what circuit first,
I ask not: but unless God send His hail
Or blinding fireballs, sleet or stifling snow,
In some time, His good time, I shall arrive:
He guides me and the bird. In His good time!"

— *Paracelsus.*

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The faith of Robert
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